

A Call to Action for Teacher Preparation Programs: Supporting Critical Conversations and Democratic Action in Safe Learning Environments

Journal of Teacher Education
2018, Vol. 69(3) 205–208
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DOI: 10.1177/0022487118766510
journals.sagepub.com/home/jte


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We write this editorial at a time when the political polarization in the United States and elsewhere leaves very little room for having complex and reasoned discussions that help establish trust in a diverse democracy. This is most recently evidenced by opposing views on gun control. As Hess and McAvoy (2015) state, “polarization causes distrust, and distrust causes polarization” (p. 8, citing research by McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006). Moreover, the current polarization creates a culture where coming to a compromise that all can accept is seen as a loss for both sides, rather than as a victory for all. Reactions to recent episodes of school violence are, sadly, reflections of this growing polarization. This editorial is a continuation of conversations related to critical democracy and educational justice that have been expressed in several of our editorials (e.g., Carter Andrews, Richmond, & Floden, 2018; Richmond, Floden, Bartell, & Petchauer, 2017). These topics have continued salience given the recent school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, and have led us to recognize the need to address critical democracy and educational justice in a more substantive way in the pages of the journal. We acknowledge that, unfortunately, school shootings are not a new phenomenon; yet, the Parkland tragedy has garnered national attention in ways that are elevating not only conversations about gun control and school safety but also other divisive issues such as free speech, environmental policy, and school choice. For these conversations to be productive and lead to democratic decisions, students must learn how to deliberate, work to understand others’ viewpoints, evaluate arguments and evidence in support of each point of view, and engage with others to reach decisions. We believe that teacher preparation programs have a moral obligation to ensure that future teachers understand how to cultivate school and classroom culture and climate that emanate humanity, dignity, and respect for all, and to ensure that teachers can support students’ ability to engage in discussions with those who hold opposing views.

In this editorial, we outline three gap areas that currently exist in many teacher preparation programs. These areas are framed by three overarching questions that teacher educators and K-12 educators are asking in these challenging times: (a) How can we ensure student safety in learning environments?

(b) How do we help preservice teachers (PSTs) and K-12 students develop foundational skills for critically discussing and analyzing controversial and sensitive topics? (c) How do teacher educators and teachers support students in justice movements and advocacy work that reflect the social justice mindsets and dispositions they aim to enact? We acknowledge that these questions are not easily addressed by program changes or curriculum reform. Collective structural change is required to achieve the type of transformative educational justice to which we aspire. Currently many teacher education programs are not designed with a curricular focus on issues of school safety, youth advocacy and resistance, trauma response, and cultivating teachers’ skills for facilitating conversations related to controversial and/or sensitive topics. Furthermore, many teacher educators are ill-equipped to facilitate dialogues in their classrooms on such topics, which can have implications for maintaining affirming, inclusive, and safe classrooms.

Below we describe each of the gap areas facing teacher education programs and offer ways forward for teacher educators and practicing teachers as we collectively work to effectively educate all students in the current national and global sociopolitical climate.

Creating and Maintaining Safe Classrooms at the College and K-12 Levels

The issue of school safety has a long-standing history in education; however, the increasing number of school and college campus shootings has elevated this issue to a new level. Teacher education programs have not necessarily had to contend with this issue before now, but given recent events ensuring student and teacher safety in schools

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and classrooms is paramount. The concept of “safety” in a learning environment can take on a variety of meanings. Defining what it means to create “safe space” for students is fraught with tension. Yet, school violence in its traditional sense is a matter of international concern, and students routinely encounter a range of safety issues in school and on college campuses. In these times when students experience symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001; Goldstein, 2005), and other forms of violence (e.g., physical assault, sexual assault, brute force, verbal abuse), it is essential that PSTs be prepared to recognize violent acts and their antecedents, and respond in ways that prioritize the students’ well-being. Silence and avoidance are forms of complicity to systems of oppression sustained through public policy, law-making, and social media-based broadcasting of horrendous acts of terror (e.g., such as Parkland, Florida). Space in this editorial does not allow for the necessary substantive discussion of student safety so desperately needed. However, a first step to creating and maintaining safe classrooms at the college and K-12 levels might be regularly dialoguing about current events and other issues of personal significance to PSTs and K-12 students that are likely impacting students’ social, emotional, and psychological well-being.

It does PSTs and their future students a disservice if they are not taught the practice of acknowledging one’s humanity in relationship to various forms of violence in the local community, and other more abstract assaults wielded in the broader sociocultural and political contexts of their teaching and learning. A baseline for acknowledging (threats of) violence is teacher educators being unafraid to contend with the discomfort associated with broaching controversial topics with PSTs. This is especially important when the issue needing to be discussed falls outside a teacher educator’s expertise. If teacher educators are ill-equipped to engage critical stances against injustice in their teaching, then their institutions bear the responsibility for providing opportunities for their professional learning in these areas. These opportunities for engaging openly with colleagues across the teacher preparation program, and perhaps with experts external to the institution, better position teacher educators to establish learning environments with active commitments to justice. Such professional development might also be central to improving teacher educators’ confidence to facilitate discussions of controversial and sensitive topics. In addition, PSTs need to see their instructors struggle with sometimes not knowing all the answers to tough questions about the world and, as a practice, become more aware of their own precarity.

Helping Students (PSTs) Develop the Skills for Facilitating Discussions on Controversial and Sensitive Topics

Learning to close the distance between what issues teachers and faculty identify as important, and what issues students and families deem significant to shaping their experiences

with the world around them, is central to enabling PSTs’ competence to adeptly facilitate discussions of controversial and sensitive topics. This distance has been discussed as “actor-observer difference” (Jones & Nisbet, 1971) or “perspective divergence” (Warren, 2014a). Teacher educators and PSTs should know that it is okay to disagree, to see the same event from different and perhaps opposing viewpoints. They should also know that facilitating discussions deemed controversial may lead to conflict or resistance, but that this resistance is necessary for productive learning environments (Toshalis, 2015). As noted by authors in this issue of *Journal of Teacher Education (JTE)*, for example, storytelling is a useful tool by which to acquire first-person perspectives such that the teacher is better prepared to make professional decisions that lead to productive pedagogical outcomes, and interactions that students and families translate as caring (see Gaines et al., 2018; Reismann et al., 2018).

Similarly, adopting students’ points of view, elsewhere referred to as a “process and act of knowing” (Warren, 2018) or “social perspective taking” (Gehlbach, 2004a, 2004b; Gehlbach & Brinkworth, 2012), creates moments for educators to glean from the experiential knowledge of those whose voices tend to be muted or omitted from dominant discourse. Perspective taking is a dimension of empathy. Empathy is useful for improving how teachers are prepared to communicate and respond across racial and cultural difference (Jaber, Southerland, & Dake, 2018; McAllister & Irvine, 2002; Warren, 2013, 2014b). Applying empathy is essential to the work of facilitating controversial and sensitive topics, specifically as a function of perspective taking. Perspective taking happens in all sorts of ways, including through one-on-one conversations with students and large group discussions. It also happens through teachers’ professional development, dialogue with diverse colleagues, reading and research on topics generally unfamiliar but pertinent to understanding the contemporary social climate of our schools, and the function of other social institutions in the United States.

Hess and McAvoy (2015) describe teachers’ approaches to helping students learn to take others’ perspectives in the context of high school civics education. Drawing on surveys, classroom observations, and interviews, they describe some of the approaches teachers have taken to help students learn practices essential to participation in deliberative democracy. For example, they sometimes articulate positions and arguments different from their own personal convictions, an approach that is particularly important when all the students in a school hold one point of view. Learning to deliberate requires engaging with multiple points of view.

These practices and priorities we call for are limited if the purview of teacher education stops at the school walls. Rather, these practices develop and exist within a network of community assets around schools. Here, we are referring to first responders, counselors, psychologists, social workers, leaders of faith-based organizations, and other groups. These

people and related institutions play integral roles in maintaining safe communities, responding to traumas after violent incidents that rupture safety, and cultivating a more caring and justice-oriented world. While educators may briefly interface with a narrow cross-section of these groups during a teacher education program (especially school counselors), we must ask how teacher education programs are preparing educators to function in abiding and effective ways within this network of assets. These are questions of connectedness, a concept taken up by the recent push for teacher leadership (e.g., Baker-Doyle, 2017) that draws from earlier sociological concepts around networks and relational ties (Granovetter, 1983). While strong relational ties with other educators help teachers persist through challenges (Baker-Doyle, 2011), these kinds of relational ties less often facilitate new information, resources, and ideas (Baker-Doyle & Petchauer, 2015). It is more often through weak relational ties and open networks that educators encounter and become connected to a rich web of community assets (Granovetter, 1983). This principle has implications for teacher education programs, which should be developing candidates' abilities to locate assets in community networks (a kind of literacy) and maintain ongoing and open relationship with these assets. Questions such as "Who are the first responders in this community?" "Who are the crisis interventionists?" "Which faith-based leaders help heal wounds in the community?" and, crucially, "How are these assets configured with one another in an evolving, unfolding, and unsettling network?" are essential to this work. The final question pushes our concern beyond prior calls for community-based knowledge for teachers (e.g., Noguera, 2008) and toward a different understanding of how humans and objects, policies, and so on act upon one another in networked relationships (Fenwick & Richards, 2010). Ultimately, we believe that a critical task for teacher education programs is to cultivate teachers' development of a professional identity which includes them understanding themselves as members of a larger community and to develop strategies to enact practices that create agency and support that same identity (e.g., Richmond, 2015; Richmond & Wray, 2017).

Preparing PSTs to Support Youth Advocacy for Social Justice: Enacting a Pedagogy of Solidarity

Teacher education programs and faculty are also ill-equipped to help PSTs develop skills for supporting youth advocacy in schools. Given the rise in activism being demonstrated by post-millennials, we believe that part of the critical democratic project in teacher education is helping young people see school as a place where they can enact agency and experience belonging and competence. These are three assets that are central to youth development (Mittra, 2004). This requires that programs go beyond helping PSTs understand the concept of integrating student voice into decision making about

schooling inequities; it also requires the creation of curricular and out-of-classroom experiences that challenge future teachers to consider how to help K-12 students be effective resisters of oppressive conditions and systems beyond school walls that they read in their world and the world of others (Freire, 2000). By assisting youth in collective critical consciousness-raising and action, future teachers can model a pedagogy of solidarity (Freire, Freire, & de Oliveira, 2014) that should also be modeled by their teacher educators. This approach to supporting youth advocacy for social justice is much more hands-on in terms of defining how to engage in advocacy work for issues young people care about.

One way in which PSTs can support K-12 students in advocacy work is through youth participatory action research (YPAR). As a pedagogy of solidarity, teacher educators and teachers can encourage youth-led justice work via research efforts where students are seen as experts in their own lived experiences, and as capable of producing knowledge that can positively change their schools and communities. YPAR is self-affirming, promotes youths' sociopolitical development and psychological empowerment by allowing them to generate the research questions of focus around their issues of concern and utilize their developing skills and motivation to take action. The research base on the process and outcomes of YPAR remind us that moving out of the way and letting youth lead is one of the primary forms of supporting their development as critically informed and active citizens of a democracy (see, for example, Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Irizarry, 2009; McIntyre, 2000; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Watson & Marciano, 2015). Teacher preparation programs that have an explicitly stated focus on social justice should evidence in their program design, content, experiences, and faculty/instructor composition an intentional focus on YPAR. However, we believe all teacher preparation programs should recognize and incorporate YPAR as a pedagogical stance and instructional tool. As we suggest this, we recognize that our own teacher preparation program has strides to make in this area. PSTs and K-12 students need opportunities to study social problems that affect their lives and develop actions to rectify the problems (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Ultimately, the presence of this focus in teacher education supports democracy in action.

These three gap areas challenge us to not only consider what we can do programmatically and curricularly to cultivate PSTs' agency in enacting critical democracy in their classrooms. They also demand a strategic investment in research that examines these issues. In addition, it is important for us to work with and through our professional organizations such as American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and others to engage our colleagues in enacting pedagogies of solidarity. These pedagogies would address educational and social inequities that prevent symbolic and physical safety and productive exchange of ideas that should be present in our teacher preparation programs and our schools.

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